Intermountain Region

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In temporary move, battlefield archives and collections will be relocated for safer storage and preservation

Museum displays will remain on exhibit in visitor center

CROW AGENCY, Mont., March 28, 2011 -- In a move to protect and preserve the historic objects and records at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, the National Park Service (NPS) will temporarily relocate the park's museum collection and archives while it works to establish a more secure and permanent repository at the battlefield.

The collection, which includes more than 123,000 historical archive items and nearly 26,000 historic objects and specimens, will go to the NPS's Western Archeological and Conservation Center (WACC), a premier preservation and storage facility in Tucson, AZ. The temporary relocation will not include museum items and photographs already on display in the monument visitor center, where they will remain on exhibit. The transfer of the rest of the collections is expected to be completed by the end of the summer.

"This is great news for such a significant and irreplaceable collection," said Kate Hammond, superintendent of the monument, which preserves the site of one of the most famous and iconic battles of the 19th-century Indian Wars on America's western frontier. "We recognize the historical and cultural value of these priceless objects and archives. This temporary relocation will keep the collection together and available for researchers, in the best possible place for its protection and conservation until it can come home to a new museum facility."

Park Service and monument officials decided to move the Little Bighorn collection because of the potential for irreversible deterioration of items or catastrophic loss by fire or flood in its present, substandard location – the basement of the park's small and outdated visitor center.

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"The collection and archives of Little Bighorn are nothing less than cultural and historical treasures," said John Wessels, director of the NPS's eight-state, 91-park Intermountain Region, which includes Montana and the monument. The region also operates WACC. "Unfortunately, all are at risk, and some need special attention. This temporary measure represents both a rescue effort and a commitment to protect these treasures now while we work to give them the permanent home they deserve."

Wessels said the Park Service and the monument will press forward with efforts to build a new visitor center and museum collection facility at Little Bighorn so the collection can return in improved condition for proper, permanent storage and display. The monument's 1986 General Management Plan calls for construction of these facilities outside the present park boundaries, which include only 765 acres of the battlefield's 12,000 acres. New facilities would provide the room needed to convey more fully the causes and consequences of one of the nation's most important and symbolic cultural and military conflicts.

"We are committed to concerted negotiations with the Crow Tribe, the Custer Battlefield Preservation Committee, and others interested in the monument's future," Wessels said. "A renewed collaboration with our partners to give these invaluable objects and archives a proper new home would enhance enormously how we tell the story and the lessons of Little Bighorn."

Superintendent Hammond added: "We understand how important this collection is to the people of Montana, historians and the tribes associated with Little Bighorn. Every step we take in this process is for the sake of preserving the collection and its ultimate return to the battlefield."

NPS regional experts in museum and archive management examined the possibility of storing the collection closer to Little Bighorn. Two NPS locations in the Montana-Wyoming area – Yellowstone National Park, and Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site west of Helena – were studied but do not have the space or staff to care properly for the collection and provide access for researchers. Non-Park Service locations also were considered, but numerous logistical, staffing, security and management issues made them less preferable than WACC.

During their time at the center, the collection and archives will have the advantage of museum-quality storage, conservation laboratories and a staff of professional curators, conservators and archivists. Many center staffers have more than a decade of experience working with the Little Bighorn collection. After unpacking and organizing the collection for re-storage, WACC staff will begin a long-term preservation effort on high-priority items and objects. The monument and WACC are committed to resuming access to the collection by researchers in summer of 2012, after the collection has been re-situated in its temporary home.

"We are not looking to keep this collection here forever," said Tef Rodeffer, manager of the Museum Services Program for the Intermountain Region. "We want the collection to be in really good shape when Little Bighorn is ready to receive it back home, where it belongs."

At present, some of the Little Bighorn collection is deteriorating, much of it is inadequately stored, and all of it is under threat of accidental damage or destruction. Most of the 149,000 artifacts and archival items have been stored for decades in the basement of the monument's 52-year-old visitor center, a space never designed or equipped for museum storage.

The present storage area also lacks fire suppression and adequate climate control, is at risk of flood damage from ceiling-mounted water pipes, and is not accessible to anyone with physical disabilities. The space also is too cramped for proper preservation of objects, is not conducive to research, and does not meet NPS standards for museum storage or American Association of Museums "best practices."

The decision for temporary relocation came after monument staff conducted an extensive "public engagement" process to discuss key park issues, including the museum collection, an insufficient and outdated visitor center, parking and roads, and protecting more of the battlefield lands.

"In those meetings and public comments, we heard repeatedly that Little Bighorn's museum collection is highly important and needs to be protected," Hammond said. "Now, we are acting to do exactly that. The collection cannot afford to wait any longer."

In fact, about 30,000 Little Bighorn archives already are at WACC to undergo conservation work, cataloging and conversion to digital record formats for easier storage and public access. Those include U.S. 7th Cavalry documents, historic newspapers, and administrative records. As with the rest of the collection, these archives will return to the monument when it has adequate and secure space to store them.

Little Bighorn's White Swan Memorial Library will remain at the monument in its present location, the historic "Stone House." It is the largest publicly available research collection of literature on the battle, Lt. Col. George A. Custer, the Indian Wars and the Northern Plains tribes. It also is the first stop for anyone researching or seeking more information about Little Bighorn.

For more details about the monument's collections, the results of the public engagement strategy, frequently asked questions about the move and other monument information, please visit the Little Bighorn Battlefield website, at www.nps.gov/libi.

For interview requests, please contact Kate Hammond, superintendent of Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, at 406-638-2621.

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